

What does it take to change a mind?

I am currently reading [Howard Gardner's *Changing Minds: The art and science of changing our own and other people's minds*](#).

Gardner, an admitted [cognitivist](#), offers an interpretation of what it takes to change minds in significant ways (a [theme](#) that I have been exploring lately).

The book's focus falls on **change agents**, people who practice or aspire to be mind-changers. Gardner lays out his argument in a manner that is immediately approachable by non-academics. This method, while working well for the masses, offers a host of rabbit holes for practicing researchers. Nevertheless, like his [theory of multiple intelligences](#), Gardner sets the stage for further research and debate that makes it a worthwhile read. I have chosen to limit my post and analysis to the parts of the text associated with educators. The book itself goes into greater detail about changing minds on a number of levels that would take far too long for me to adequately and appropriately cover.

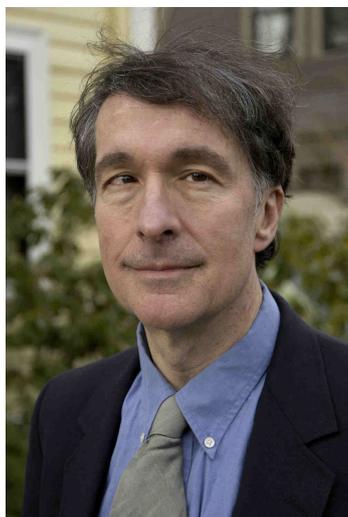


When we think about an **idea** (i.e., *the contents of the mind*) we generally conjure a mental image in our mind that contains both **content** (*semantic meaning*) and a **form/format** (the language or system of symbols in which the content is represented). Gardner argues that multiple versions of the same idea represent a potentially powerful way to shift our way of thinking (other contents of mind that can affect change include **concepts, stories, theories, and skills**). Gardner then introduces a framework of **seven factors or levers** that *could* be at work in cases involving changing minds (pp. 15-18):

- **Reason** – *a logical, rational approach*
- **Research** – *a collection of relevant data/findings that is formal or informal*
- **Resonance** – *the approach/change feels right or fits the situation*
- **Representational Redescription** – *the change lends itself to multiple representations in a number of different forms*
- **Resources and Rewards** – *positive reinforcements*
- **Real World Events** – *the broader context surrounding one's environment*
- **Resistances** – *difficulties associated with change or reasons not to*

For Gardner, “a mind change is most likely to come about when the first six factors operate in consort and the resistances are relatively weak” (p. 18). When resistances are strong, good luck and good night.

Growing up we acquire prevalent sets of concepts, stories, theories and skills that make up our mental schema for interpreting the world around us (i.e., *our underlying belief system*). Changing our mind requires us to first be **open to change** (which, for some, is no simple feat). Change also requires a level of **trust**; we must trust those outside experiences, forces, and/or people that are attempting to sway our opinions (e.g., they must appear reasonable, they must resonate with us, the rewards for taking on this new point of view must present themselves clearly, etc.). Gardner explains:



“It is more difficult to change the mind when perspectives are held strongly, and publicly, and by individuals with rigid temperament. It is easier to change minds when individuals find themselves in a new environment, surrounded by peers, of a different persuasion (for example, when one enters college), or when individuals undergo shattering experiences (for example, a severe accident, a divorce, an unexpected death) or encounter luminous personalities. Even so, however, fans of mind changing must often mute their claims of victory. The opportunities for backsliding are patent among those who make a lot of noise—indeed, they may be especially patent among those who are given to histrionic statements (“it’s an entirely new ballgame”) and then register disappointment when the rest of the world remains much as it was before. In other words, it’s easier to talk about changing minds in general than to effect enduring changes in any particular mind (p. 62).

When discussing changing minds, Gardner means changing the way one thinks or behaves (i.e., **significant** changes) as opposed to **trivial** changes like eating bagels for breakfast instead of eggs.

In terms of educating educators, I have attempted to adopt some of Gardner’s findings as they apply to working with students. As such Gardner suggests that **three conditions must first be met**:

Resistances must be clearly recognized and confronted. In other words, it is necessary to directly confront the myriad of conceptual and methodological misconceptions that educators hold. This means confronting people’s inadequate modes of thought and conclusions about the world and technology head on using sound principles, logic, and reason. Second, *we must provide many rich, illustrative examples* culled from research, practice, and the work of others. Finally, once we fully immersed in our examples, we then have the opportunity to approach the topic from *multiple perspectives*, using a variety of lens’, tools, and ways of seeing.

For working with students/learners, Gardner offers the following entry points for changing minds (pp. 140-141):

1. **Narrative** – *telling stories about the topic and the people involved with it*
2. **Quantitative** – *using examples connected to the topic*
3. **Logic** – *identifying the key elements or units and exploring their logical connections*
4. **Existential** – *addressing big questions, such as the nature of truth, beauty, life and death*
5. **Aesthetic** – *examining instances in terms of their artistic properties or capturing the examples themselves in*

works of art

6. **Hands-on** – working directly with tangible examples

7. **Cooperative or social** – engaging in projects with others where each makes a distinctive contribution to successful execution

Essentially, Gardner feels that educators need to address the “multiple intelligences” he associates with the mind when attempting to influence the thinking of others. He does offer the following caveat:

“The mind changes involved in disciplinary learning are profound ones; given the strength and ubiquity of resistances, they are difficult to effect even under favorable circumstances; and those educators who can help to bring them about constitute a precious human resource” (p. 141).



The take away from this conception is that there are many effective ways to present content, and the **tipping point** is most likely to come about if educators use “several formats flexibly and imaginatively” (p. 141). I associate this way of thinking with *differentiating instruction*; that is, providing multiple opportunities for students to engage with both the content and each other.

For the educational technologist in all of us, I feel it is critical for us to model how we, as innovators, go about looking at the world (see [Brown, Collins & Duguid's notion of cognitive apprenticeship](#)). We need to show (not tell) how we are demanding of ourselves; how we look for holes, how we are skeptical, how we conduct research, how we probe, how we experiment, how we try to break things, and how we are willing to suspend our beliefs until we are proven otherwise. We need to show others what motivates us, how we know when something feels right to us, and how we utilize our resources.



Overall, I find Gardner's work thought provoking. I can't say that I find all that he says resonating. I feel that he overlooks a lot of important research associated with the social nature of teaching and learning although I find it seeping into his work occasionally (and unattributed).

I like the essence of his seven factors, even though he seems to be consciously limiting himself by only incorporating words that begin with the letters **R & E**.

His preface includes one more important point that I hinted at earlier and I wanted to reprise, and that is the notion of trust and trustees. “No community can exist without a measure of trust” – author's emphasis (p. xiv). This includes the desirability of trustees – those members of the community who have an ability to see things clearly; those members who are wise, skeptical, and who look out for the best interest of the community as opposed to their own interests. Trustees have power and sway over others and are important elements of change. To be a powerful agent of change, then we must instill a sense of trust in those we want to affect. This essence of trust may not be earned in 5 minutes or perhaps it can, as long as we perform our work with integrity, with honesty, and with truthiness.

I would be interested to know your thoughts, especially if you're familiar with Gardner's work.

References:

Brown, J.S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*, 18(1): 32-42.

Gardner, H. (2006). *Changing minds: The art and science of changing our own and other people's minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

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